

## How to Protect Yourself Against the Flu

The flu season is here in Massachusetts. Here are some tips for staying healthy.

### HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Flu vaccine is the best way to protect yourself against the flu. The flu vaccine is about 80% effective in preventing the flu, and the few people who do get the shot but still get the flu, end up with a milder illness. **The viruses in the vaccine are killed, so you cannot get the flu from the vaccine.**

### WHO IS AT RISK

Certain people are at high risk of complications from the flu and should get the vaccine each year. They include people 65 or older; and younger people with heart disease or lung disease, including asthma; those with weakened immune systems and certain other chronic illnesses, such as diabetes; pregnant women and children or teenagers who are on extended aspirin therapy. Residents of long-term care facilities are also at increased risk and should be vaccinated. In addition, immunizing health care workers in all settings (inpatient, outpatient, and acute and chronic care facilities) and household contacts of patients at risk is important in protecting patients from the flu. Other people may receive the vaccine to avoid the discomfort and inconvenience that comes with getting the flu.

### WHEN TO GET THE SHOT

The vaccine is different each year, so you need to get an influenza vaccine every year. Flu activity in New England usually does not begin until December, doesn't peak until January or February and may last into March or April. The vaccine becomes effective about 2 weeks after you receive it. People are encouraged to get vaccinated throughout the flu season, especially those at risk for complications from influenza, including everyone 65 years of age and older and younger people with chronic medical conditions. December, January or even later is not too late to be vaccinated.

### IF YOU'VE BEEN EXPOSED

Flu is contagious and travels quickly through offices and households. If you have been exposed to a person with the flu and have not yet been vaccinated, you should get vaccinated as soon as possible. If you are in one of the above high-risk groups, your health care provider may also prescribe an antiviral drug. Contact your health care provider if you have questions about antiviral medications. But remember, antiviral drugs are **NOT** a substitute for vaccination and may cause side effects in some people. Annual flu vaccination remains the most effective way to protect yourself from getting the flu.

### IF YOU GET SICK

People in high-risk groups who get the flu may be treated with these same antiviral drugs. Antiviral treatment should be started within 24 to 48 hours of the onset of symptoms.

Anyone who gets the flu should get plenty of rest, drink lots of fluids (at least one glass of water or juice every hour while awake), and take acetaminophen or ibuprofen to control fever or pain.

**Children or teenagers suspected of having the flu should not be given aspirin**, since this may lead to a severe reaction called Reye syndrome. Antibiotics may be necessary for those with complications from the flu, like pneumonia, sinusitis or ear infections.